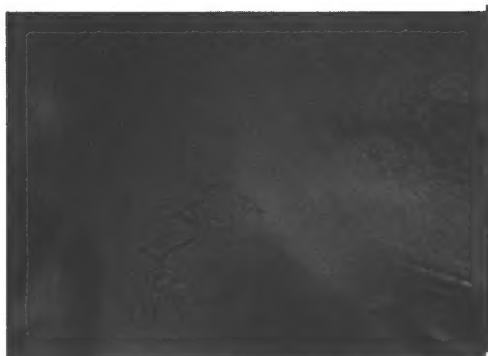




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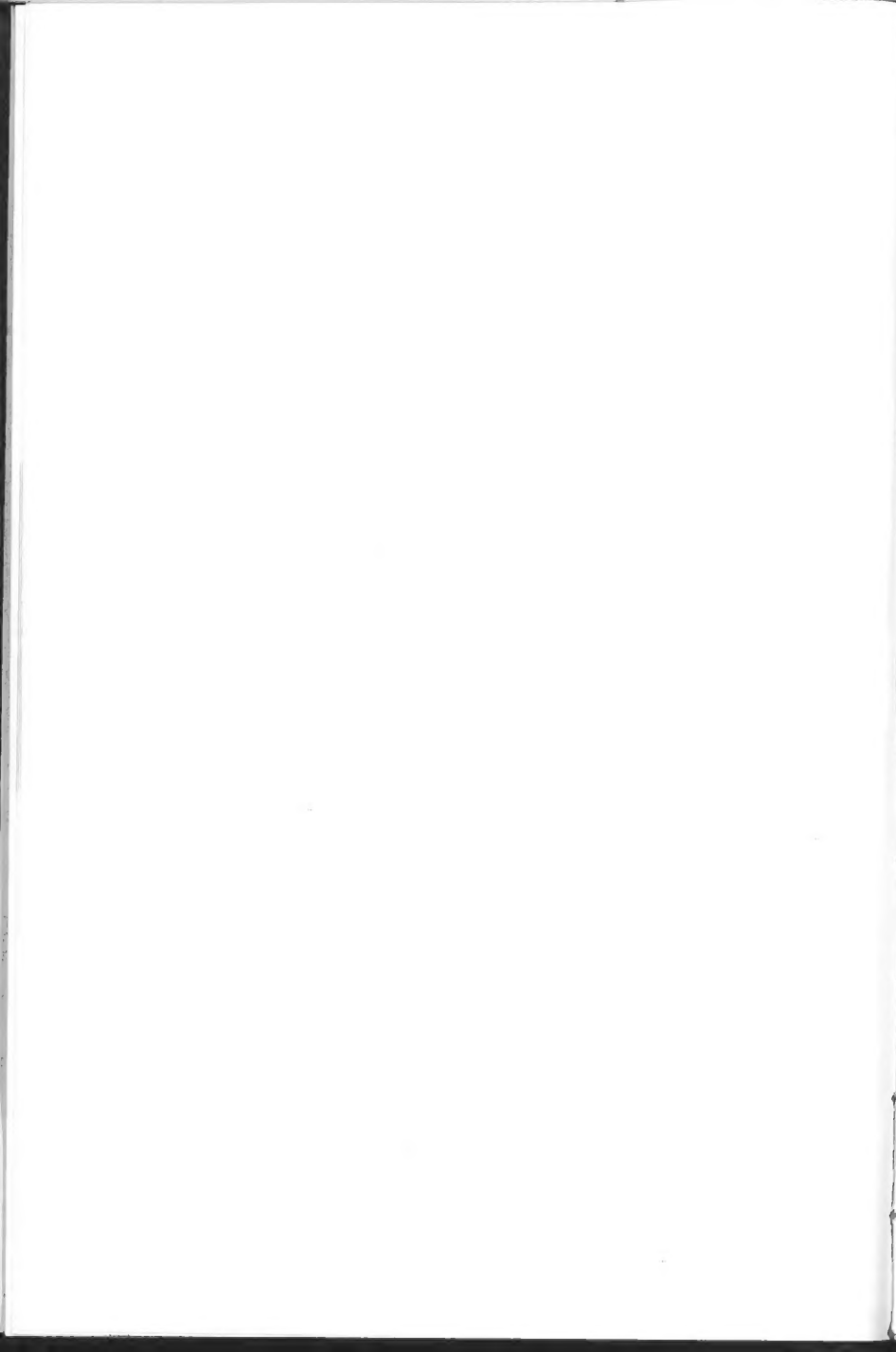
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*to mama
for the faith
to indygo
for the hope
to my family
for the greatest of these*



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Introduction: Oceanic mothering

Drisana Deborah Jack's second book, *skin*, is a wonderfully sensual, fluid, and powerful collection of poetry, born out of what Antonio Benitez-Rojo identifies as the Caribbean's "unpredictable flux" and flows. Brimming over with images of oceanic wombs spiraling like the Milky Way, her poems resound with the pounding rhythm and rhyme of the ocean. She foregrounds salty fluidity and diasporic mothering in a complex body of poems, which insist on the Caribbean as a space of gendered "change, transit, return," inextricable from the larger, restless African diaspora as it is continually reborn.

As one of St. Martin's leading poets, Drisana Deborah Jack carefully situates her work within the unique history of her island nation and its location within the Caribbean. The collection begins with the moving gesture of claiming her homeland (which is still a French and Dutch colony) via its opening words of "my country" ("waterpoem 1"). These first words of the first poem alert us to the importance of place in the consolidation of self. But before we have time to imagine such a belonging to be simple and nostalgic for the Black diasporic subject, "waterpoem 1" shows belonging not to be a

birthright but rather a practice of reclamation. For the poet, to belong means a continual negotiation and re-negotiation of arrivals and departures.

Jack's suggestion of "reluctant arrival" and "resolute departure," immediately maps out a diasporic world where enslaved captives were brought from Africa to the Caribbean, disembarking against their will. This "first" arrival is overlaid with other subsequent deracinations, as the Caribbean has become host to wave after wave of immigration, fueled by (post) colonial exploitation and underdevelopment. Indeed, Jack teaches and works in both the USA and St. Martin, occupying the perilous "space in-between" as she travels from home to home, a theme further developed in "subway musings." "waterpoem 1," instead of mourning these relocations as the poet does in the Haiku-inspired "alovepoemaboutyouforme," quietly acknowledges the reclamatory practice of making home. Jack makes new dwellings in the "need for solace" and "interruption." She then asserts that these in-between spaces that encompass a history of arrivals and departures are her home and the places from which she writes "of the drowning of weeds / the nourishing of seeds" ("a poet's farewell").

The quiet voice of the first poem gives way to the fierce roar of the next poem entitled "en memento mori."

One of the best poems of the collection, "en memento mori" rips apart any complacency about arrival and departure, revealing the horror and brutality around forcible deracination and migration. The poem is located at the crossroads between African and European forms—a Yoruba prayer/chant and the classic European *memento mori* poem. As such, Jack highlights the syncretic cultural heritage of diasporic Africans, showing that out of the violent clash of cultures, a new people were born. *Memento mori* translates from the Latin to mean "Remember you must die" or "Remember that you are mortal." The term was used in classical antiquity as a way to encourage people to live life to the fullest. It was appropriated in the Christian context to suggest the fleeting and illusory nature of earthly pleasures and the necessity for morality. If the pleasures of this earth were empty, one needs to focus only on the afterlife, on the fate awaiting one's soul. Traditional *memento mori* examples include still-life paintings (which originally included symbols of mortality such as a skull or a time piece) and funeral art such as cadaver tombs, which de-

picted the decayed corpse of the deceased.

Jack might have first encountered the term *memento mori* at the center of a major T-crossing—midway between her mother's village of Cole Bay, her high school in Cul-de-Sac, and Philipsburg, capital of the southern part of her island. The words are welded on the relatively small iron gate of one of the island's largest burial grounds. Hardly visible to the speeding traffic or even to those walking by, but to the then "sullen girl / not unhappy / just ... deep blue" the term was sighted as a mystery, a language and a meaning to unearth. There are four conventions of the *memento mori* poem that Jack subverts in significant ways: 1. the prevalence of the fear of death, 2. the use of images/metaphors of death to remind a sinner that his body would decay, 3. the repudiation of sin alongside a reaffirmation of faith, 4. a succession of awful images "dwelling with insistent horror upon the corruption of the body, the terror of the grave, and the punishment of that greater pit into which an unprepared soul might fall" (Morris, 1035).

The poet begins her "en memento mori" with one of the ultimate symbols of death for children of the diaspora—the slave ship with slaves "coming coming in the belly of vessels of

greed / packed on the shelves forced intimacies." However, at the beginning of the poem, this image of death is not used to remind us of our mortality. Rather, it recalls the living presence of "those who came before," our enslaved ancestors who survive death by our acts of remembrance.

Jack reworks Christian notions of mortality and the afterlife by showing the ancestors to be living forces that crisscross the boundaries between the living and the dead. In keeping with traditional Yoruba and other African beliefs, the ancestors are alive as long as we pay homage to them, as long as we recognize their continued presence in our daily lives. The third stanza insists on their return, this time not in the belly of slave ships, but rather in the form of hurricanes. "en memento mori" asserts that hurricanes are ancestral presences that "come like a righteous anger embracing Yemanja / raising her up and reigning her on our heads." The period of their arrival across the Atlantic coincides with the hurricane season as they reign (with its obvious pun on the salty rain that accompanies hurricanes) on our heads.

Instead of the melancholic tone that pervades the traditional *memento mori* poem, the anger, resistance, joy and raw power of ances-

tral freedom songs permeate throughout. We get images of various African peoples and the cultural forms forged in the Caribbean such as the Ouatouba, Bamboulay, and Ponum, resisting the "massa" through their song, the burning down of plantations, the grinding of their hips. We see this resistance being passed down from mother to mother, worked into braids like hair grease, transmitted generationally in the acts of emancipation and independence that honor the flight of those with wings.

In "en memento mori," the homage to our African ancestral legacy is achieved via images of survival, resistance, and emancipation and by way of various stylistic devices. The images in each verse are followed by the Yoruba phrase *axé* (pronounced *ashé*), giving the reader a sense of the poem as incantation, meant to be spoken out loud. According to Joseph Murphy in his book *Santeria*, "The sacred world ... is motivated by ashe [*axé*]. Ashe is growth, the force toward completeness and divinity ... Ashe is the absolute ground of reality. But we must remember that it is a ground that moves and, so, no ground at all" (Murphy, 130). *Axé* is also said after a statement to mean "so be it." Jack thus continually evokes a divine moving energy, a prayer that punctuates each

verse like an amen. One can think of each *axé* as a response to the call of the verse, an answer that resounds across life and death.

The poem contains references to Yoruba gods or Orishas such as Yemanjá and Oshun. The Yoruba and their diasporic children believe that Olodumare is the Supreme Being aided in ruling by the Orishas, a pantheon of deities. These deities are associated with different elements and parts of the universe, such as the wind, the ocean, and the river. Yemanjá is the ultimate personification of motherhood, represented by the maternal pull and flow of the ocean. She has, for obvious reasons, acquired greater import to those who survived the Atlantic crossing than those in Africa and is often thought of as the womb of the diaspora. She is associated with dyeing blue cloth, an image that reappears in Jack's "motherlines or breast-feeding the diaspora," "blue water / blue movement / blue tears / blue screams / dreams of tidal blue ... indygo child / a deeper shade of blue / a deeper shade of blues." Oshun, the Orisha of love and beauty, is often represented by the river. In the poem, men whisper "the words of Oshun to their women / making rivers run, caressing fingers," for love and birthing in the context of violence, the poet seems to

argue, is part and parcel of our struggle for liberation. The notions of love, birthing, and mothering that appear in this poem resound throughout the collection, convincing us of the political importance of acts that are often relegated to the realm of the private and personal. In "foremothers," Jack continues to show the personal as imminently political, insisting that freedom arises from saliva, amniotic fluids, locked knees and "the silent resistance / of a dinner uncooked."

The last two verses of "en memento mori" sound a warning, lest we become too comfortable in our victory over death and injustice. The poem assumes the ominous tone of a traditional *memento mori* poem by reminding us about the nearness of death. This is not an earthly death of the body but rather a death of freedom caused by apathy. Jack warns those who have survived the slave ship and plantation of the danger of taking freedom for granted. She insists that such apathy that allows sacred sites to become home to weeds will result in us passing away, our nations unclaimed. Freedom, she tells us, "has never been a gift."

Jack's introduction of Yemanjá acquires even greater significance in light of the theme of mothering in *skin*. The notion of mothering

has many faces throughout the collection—biological mothering, motherland, Mother Africa, mothernation St. Martin, mother tongue, foremother, ocean as mother, and poet as mother. Given the history of slavery in the Caribbean, in the Americas, where Black women's children were often sold away from them, and where they were forced to take care of the masters' children, the relations of Black women to mothering are haunted by loss and non-biological acts of caretaking. It has also been shaped by historical depictions of Black women as mammies, matriarchs, and welfare queens in stereotypical distortions of mothering. Black women "encounter these controlling images, not as disembodied symbolic messages but as ideas that should provide meaning in our daily lives" (Collins, 92).

Through her various poems, Drisana Jack wrenches the meaning of motherhood away from dominant perceptions to create new types of mothers who first and foremost give birth to themselves ("this little light of mine"). Jack moves beyond prescriptive biological roles of mothering, as giving birth and nurturing children assumes larger metaphoric significance within the global patterns of (post) colonial motion. She develops these ideas most fully in

"motherlines or breast-feeding the diaspora," where she poignantly insists that "the presence of love is greater than / the absence of the body." Here she redefines motherhood to include those women "who have had to / cut their children loose / give them up to the care / of un-natural mothers." Through the story of the poet's family where daughters are raised by their grandmothers, Jack shows different ways to nurture and raise children that exceed traditional roles of mothering. To be a mother, she poignantly depicts, is about a lineage of Black women who redefine the role of motherhood to allow for new meaning—"I will let you go again / as it has always been / and you must let me go / as it must be."

Jack's depiction of the cycle of her family immediately conjures up the idea of Mother Africa whose stolen children are raised in the New World by other mothers. The poems demonstrate the omnipresence of Africa for dispersed peoples. For the Caribbean immigrant living elsewhere, the idea of absent mother (lands) has added meaning. One need only look at literature by Caribbean writers such as Michelle Cliff, Paule Marshall, Joan Riley, and Jamaica Kincaid to see how the protagonists' relationships to their mothers are directly paral-

lel to their relationships to the absent motherland from which they have immigrated. Physical estrangement from one's home and mother produces the same alienating effects for these characters—they often feel loss, despair, and rage. Annie in Kincaid's *Annie John* feels unhappiness so palpable at the separation from her mother and her home of Antigua that she claims to be able to see it when she closes her eyes: "it took the shape of a small black ball all wrapped in cobwebs" (Kincaid, 84).

Jack does not deny the loss and the pain of separation from mother and motherland but her depiction of a world of multiple (fore)mothers, all of whom step up to nurture and nourish their daughters at various times, reflects the resiliency of Caribbean peoples. Thus, in "memory lapse" when she claims that her mother fills "in blanks I've left / in my daughter's memory," she re-affirms the vibrancy of a diaspora dealing with multiple dislocations and separations, for what one mother(land) cannot provide, another can and will.

skin begins and ends with the major trope of the work—water. Almost every poem portrays oceans, tides, amniotic fluid, tears, landlocked rivers, salt ponds. Jack's five waterpoems speak directly to the St. Martin landscape. In "water-

poem 2," she compares the lush promise of her youth with the tidal seduction by ocean caresses of Soualiga (an Amerindian name for St. Martin which means Land of Salt). Jack warns us in the opening lines that this oceanic intimacy is now only a memory, but this does little to prepare us for the abrupt switch from caress to the violent fists of a storm in "waterpoem 3" and its aftermath in "waterpoem 4." Tidal romance gives way to "heaving water" and "submerged streets"—we are placed directly in the path of a hurricane that flays, drowns, and destroys. The Caribbean, Jack tells her readers, is not the pastoral paradise depicted in the tourist brochures. Behind idyllic images, lies the bite of history, of those enslaved Africans brought to St. Martin to mine salt in the Great Salt Pond who revisit and wreak the vengeance for continued injustice.

Throughout Jack's written and visual work (in particular her visual installations "The Blowing Season"), one finds this notion of hurricanes as ancestral presences raining on our heads. Jack calls hurricanes a "seasonal remembrance," a way for those ancestors who did not survive the Middle Passage to construct a memorial for themselves out of wind, sea, and salt. In an interview with Jacqueline Bishop, she states that

the idea arose when she was studying satellite maps of hurricanes and saw how they "travel [...] from Africa and across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and ... how [*they*] go[...] to America, just like slaveships ..." (Jack in Bishop, 95). The first full verse of "a salting of sorts" alludes to these satellite maps when the poet writes that

... what we saw & see in re/play
and re/wind
couldn't be contained
in sound/bytes and pixels
in high definition video
there is not enough resolution
no understanding for this
reclaiming ...

Just as we cannot fully contain the image of a hurricane using technology, we can never contain the furious re-memory of our ancestors as they revisit the Caribbean and the USA. Jack's recognition of hurricanes as ancestral forces, as "a flotilla of bodies / beached bloated blurred pixelated / adrift in a history still seeking remembrance" ("waterpoem 5") has particular resonance when one remembers that New Orleans, recently devastated by Hurricane Katrina, was one of the busiest slave ports in the New World.

This idea of ancestors appearing in salt and water extends to the notion of tears throughout

skin. Personal grief is always connected to the collective grief of the diaspora still feeling the effects of imperialism—"healing unknown hurts / all this salt needs a place to go / and my cup runneth over" ("bitter water"). *skin* ends with a moving testimonial to this collective grief by evoking the African-American spiritual, what W.E.B. Du Bois calls the "Sorrow Songs" of Black folk. Using lines from "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Wade in the Water" as heart-rending refrains, Jack mourns the multiple displacements that have made refugees of children of the diaspora. The poem, like so many others in the collection, bears witness to the familiar tides that have carried slaves and their descendants to unknown shores and the "strange tides these days/ [*that*] wash our dead away" ("bitter water"). But housed in her grief are the veiled messages in the Sorrow Song. In its blending of African and New World musical forms, the Sorrow Song gives evidence to the diaspora's birth of new aesthetic forms that are blessings, prayers, and cleansings of the soul ("this poem"). It also belies the myth of Black peoples happy in their subjugation via veiled articulations about the suffering and desires of an oppressed people. But most importantly for Jack, "[t]hrough all the sorrow of the Sorrow

Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things” (Du Bois, 213).

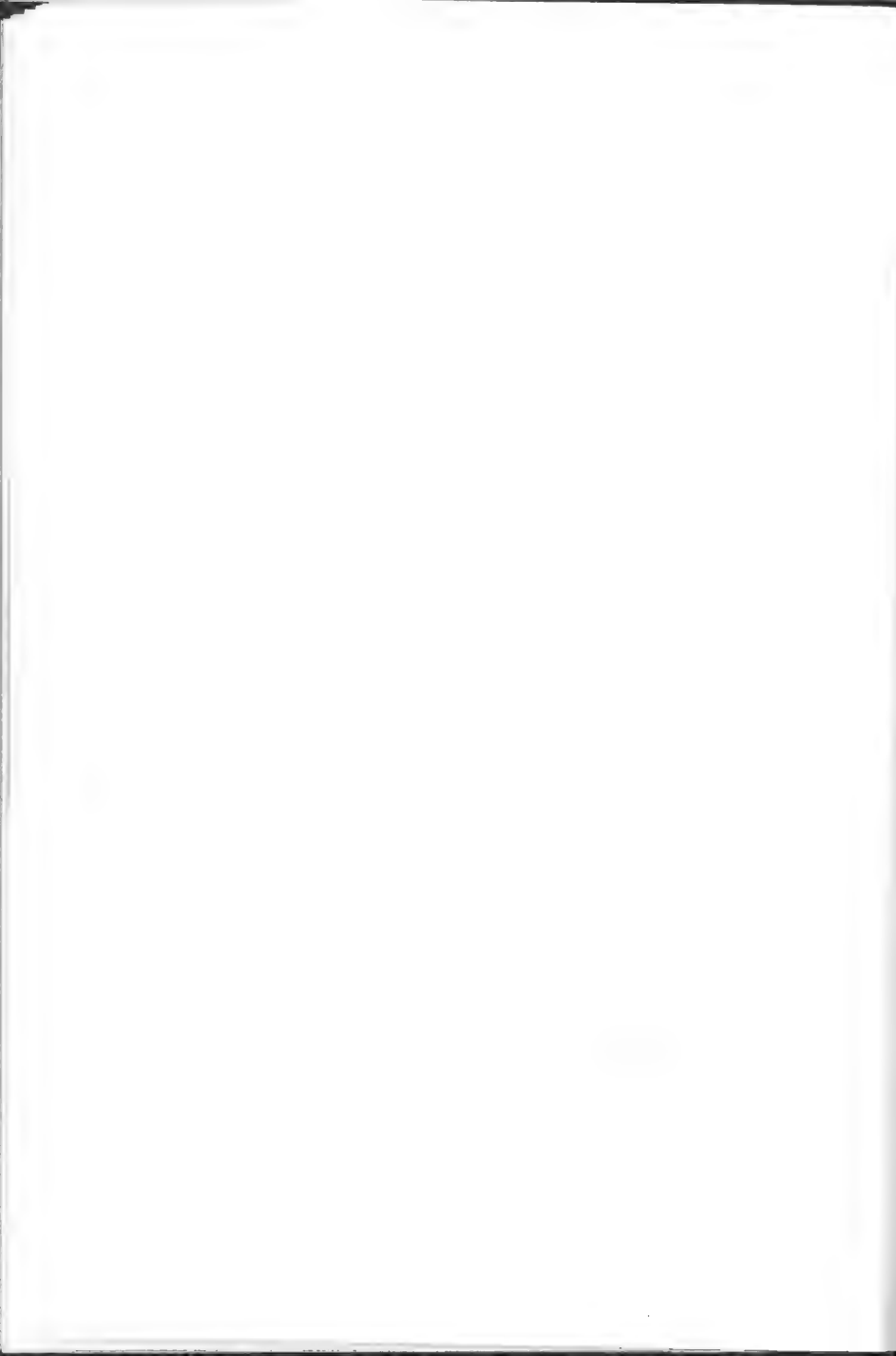
For Jack, even as it expresses the collective grief of diasporic children, poetry is about a call for justice. Poetry embodies the difficult spiritual, emotional, and political work that one does to communicate across physical and philosophical distances. It refutes the apathy that can make us take our current conditions for granted, and it warns others that the past is not yet over and the future has to be made. As it was in the beginning, Jack promises us, whether through hurricane or the caress of sea foam, “God’s gunna trouble the water.”

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waterpoem 1

my country has no rivers
yet i understand
the pull of the sea
the need for landlocked water
to make its singular way to shore
the collision of
reluctant arrival
with resolute departure
the need for solace
the need for interruption
of/and the space in-between

en memento mori

en memento mori

in remembrance of those who came
before
who made the crossing
coming coming in the belly of vessels of
greed

packed on shelves forced intimacies

axé

anger fear uncertainty condolence
repulsion hunger desperation yearning
shame fear anger
chanting prayers to orishas carried under
their tongues

axé

now they come like a righteous anger
embracing Yemanjá
raising her up and reigning her on our
heads

tears too salty to drink
from the first sunrise in June
to the last setting
in the 11th month of the year of our Lord
lord

axé

she pays tribute to her offspring/ sprung
from decks of despair
the sick, the weakened,
the dreamers, the economic excess
thrown into her waiting embrace
an answer to fevered prayers
axé
then new prayers are uttered in
the Ouatouba, the Bamboulay,
the Ponum
busting chains with a shrug
wuking up freedom
in the grinding of hips
arms swaying, fingers flickering flames in
flamboyant abandon
singing a brim song
"ah be been a hearum
buh massa been a hidum"
axé

en memento mori
we honor the mothers
who greased our hair with resistance
parting it with hope and patience
braiding our story in royal rows
this is for the women who kept

freedom warm between their thighs
nestled in their breast, shuttered behind
lashes
nourished by a veil of tears
axé
here's to men who would not see their
women grieve
another day for children
ripped from arms
& lashed from wombs
men who would not see another brother
quartered
refused to bring the shackles to hobble
another's wings
axé
to men who whispered the words of
Oshun to their women
making rivers run
caressing fingers
running waters birthing water birthing rivers
birthing passages middle passages
end passages the final passage
from enslavement
to emancipation
to independence

en memento mori

we wonder

why we must sacrifice

because freedom has never been
a gift

axé

to view a sunset on our own terms

so our children love themselves for just or
justice, not just so

so culture is not compromise

because destiny demands it

apathy is the alternative

because freedom has never been
a gift

axé

if we don't our children will curse our
name (they do already)

if we don't

we will anyway

die anyway

die

away

axé

en memento mori

national symbols lay unearth

sacred sites are home to weeds
Freedom Path is a housing complex
named after the plantation
the Baobab keeps her mystery
heroes' names are whispered
a nation waits
unclaimed

foremothers

come
let us kneel
daughters of Lohkay
grasp in our hands
the soil
of our land
breathe it in
smell the blood the toil
the saliva
the amniotic waters
that flow
in
under
ground streams
press your ear to the wind
hear the cries of our foremothers
know that they were
wild Women
spitfires
who hid sparks behind shuttered lashes
keeping passions
between locked knees
who waged the silent resistance
of a dinner uncooked

waterpoem 2

i live on another island
not my own
locked in childhood memories
me a girl green
my island lush as well
we were green together
the smell of tomorrow was ripe
bright like the sun
over a Cole Bay road at noon

when you were named Soualiga
by the first-borne-here children
salt foam smiling around a bright blue
pond
Great
your smell cloaking the land
the sea a lover whose caressing waves
yearn for permanence/ communion
you meet and retreat in
a timeless seduction
the moon an unwilling voyeur
to your tidal romance

alovepoemaboutyouforme

i will not cry tonight
i might not stop
and tears are a bitter way
to quench this
particular thirst

for a son ... seeking

a father leaves a son
to be raised by
an angry mother
becomes

the boy
that does not forgive
becomes

the youth who sees
betrayal as birthright
becomes

the lover that
does not trust
becomes

the father who
cannot
stay

subway musings

1.

there's not much to do on a
subway ride except to travel
synaptic corridors
and look for enchantment
in lost memories

2.

under/city streets breathe
teem with the stuff
of epics and haikus
bits of conversations hang in the air
where a distant sob
argues with the recalcitrant
sigh who lost his home
years before his house

3.

in this city where
dreams are born
twice as many are lost

4.
my unoccupied heart
looks for a residence
of her own
with rooms painted ochre
for warmth
steelbound and encrusted with kosha
for fortification

saturday night

he looked like you
in the dark
so i danced
with him
the scent of the sea and onions
cornered where his neck
and shoulder merged
into a resting place
for my torn cheek
he wuking up wetness
with gentle gyrations
my pores yawning to embrace his musk
the place between my thighs
weeps with longing
the newness of him teases
and you sleep
confident that i
actually stay
in my place
where you put me

memory lapse

my mother is still
more mother than
Grandmother
filling in blanks i've left
in my daughter's memory

on being home/sick

fireflies in the yard next door
are all the illuminate
this night
no moon
no stars
no elusive headlights
venture this rocky road
now
just the fire of flies
and me
beckoning the darkness
in hushed tones
to come closer

this little light of mine

our father who art in heaven
how do we spell your name

*the light shone
and the darkness
did not understand*

some people shout at God every other
day
some people shout at God 5 times a day
some people shout at God everyday
on their knees

*the light shone
and the darkness
did not understand*

some people pray to God every other
day
some people pray to God 5 times a day
some people pray to God every day
with one eye shut

*the light shone
and the darkness
did not understand*

some people talk to God everyday
some people talk to God 5 times a day
some people talk to God once a day
and
lie

*the light shone
and the darkness
did not understand*

the names keep coming
has anyone seen Jeff
he worked on the 101st floor
Olivia on the 90th
brown hair, green eyes, 5 foot 6
some
one
any
one

*the light shone
and the darkness
did not understand*

lost families no longer
wander ash tinted streets
washed clean by rain
washed clean by hoses
washed clean by tears

still
ash clings to the soles
of a childless mother,
a new widow,
a confused orphan
death is new to them
an unfamiliar visitor
ask women in Palestine how to grieve
for a lost son
ask women in Rwanda how to suffer
for the loss of innocence
ask women in Chile how to dance
with the unseen
ask women in Mississippi how to forgive
men with masks
ask the mama Diallo how to grieve
for uniformed injustice
welcome
welcome to the world
welcome to the rest of the world
who said
that giving birth to yourself
would be easy
our mother who art in heaven
how do you spell your name?

a song for AXUM

*(for Yolanda, Mosera,
Youmay & Lydia)*

in the beginning there was fire
the fire that brands itself to dreamers and
poets
makers, vessels of an idea conceived
@ its moment in time

in the beginning there was earth
embracing this embryo, weary footsteps
mingling w/ tears, seed of wanting
awaiting rebirth

in the beginning there was air
the vehicle of sound, voices raised and
hushed
hammer beating out a rhythm something
like a heartbeat)
something like a song on the edge of our
minds driving us
mad with its familiarity and strangeness

smell of sweat rode the air the smell
of change
of revolution
of fear
of re-birth

in the beginning there was AXUM
let the revelation begin.

in remembrance

(for Charles)

You and i knew
that losing paradise
was a quiet war waged on the sleeping
we understood that poetry
could be and was its own kind of warfare
the guerrilla type
that words could get you killed if placed in
the wrong order
we understood that poets were warriors
too

in the 3 a.m. stillness
my home makes sounds
that should have been settled years ago
in this 3 a.m. stillness
confessions are their own form of
forgiveness

i didn't always understand your musings
your crafting of words into sonnets
your use of form and meter
you did not understand
my free verse

but we knew and
understood the daily fall of words
that ambushed our daydreams
we bleed words
dampening notebooks
scraps of paper
cocktail napkins
the palm of our hands
in tightly locked heart-rooms
creating a third sacrament
hoping that the words we've shared
made us immune to inner betrayals

they will call you weak
i will color you sad
the deepest sad
alizarin crimson
the words we dream
keep the blanket of night
tucked under our chins
never over our heads
... sometimes

the words we pray
on bended knuckles
satisfy a madness
that claws our core
and when they fail us
there's nothing more

the lovers

younglove and oldsoul
went for a walk on a road
footsteps
melting in the dew moist ground
the path alive with the smell of an earth
refreshed
after the rainy season

younglove said to oldsoul
when i'm in a place where
most doors are closed
and the ones that open
take me to places
i
don't
want
to/go
restore my
soul

oldsoul dreams in words that embrace
younglove
on remembering
our last season yet to come
i dream of love

ripped from fecund earth and cast away
(like so many weeds)
of fingers twisted, gnarled
from obsessive replanting
of falling short
and laboring long

younglove wonders
how could you be so calm when
old images stain this New World
blood on blood on blood stain
makes a pretty red
ripe for sidewalk abstractions
the blood
the chalk
a palm up-turned
frozen/ a fist uncurling
wanting a longer lifeline
young blood/s/pitting bullets
from between clenched lips
fragments of teeth
tufts of hair
create an abstract
that has never seen the caress of a brush
hieroglyphics of hate
chaos and colors

clothe abandoned structures
notes from an angry scribe
oldsoul lovesighs
on remembering
our last season yet to come
i wonder if we loved
with sincere imperfection
our love
the walls embracing
the eye of the hurricane
an embryo in embers
and still finds itself wanting

so here's to us
we feeble two
we the bad hand dealt to
the un-kept promise of flawless love
a black heart
a red club
one to beat
the other to bludgeon

a salting of sorts

what if in the beginning
the word was flesh
&the flesh became salt

then what we saw &see in re/play
&re/wind

couldn't be contained
in sound/bytes and pixels
in high definition video
there is not enough resolution
no understanding for this
reclaiming of the salt of the earth
to the sea

&it's always the children
whose spirits are stronger
whose souls are more prepared
whose grip on the earth is fragile

&so mothers try to keep them
ignoring the call of the ocean
&the futility of this madness
mothers who bargained with the salt
to offer up one or two or five
to save just one
the salt of her womb

this unspeakable sacrifice of salt
like in the beginning
when the flesh was salt

even now/still the salt of a sea displaced
works its way into the corners of my eyes
&i see a man on his knees
in the sand
lighting incense to honor his ancestors
who were his children last Sunday
but that day we all looked for our gods
in the debris

somewhere in the mass of graves
the confusion of the missing
among the tangle of limbs
the wail of the living
the whirl of relief
we look for a place to bury our grief

somewhere in between
the sharing of a bowl of rice
the embrace of a stranger
in the rising of the sun
&the waning of the moon
with the glow of funeral pyres
&candlelight vigils on our faces

we become the salt
we become the salt
we become the salt

we become the salt
&inherit the earth

pieced together

remember?/remember/remember
re
member

that we were born
with a mist of salt
clothing our skin
young crystals
glistening under a blessing of sunshine
tasting promise with
the tips of our tongues
ears tuned/turned to a southern wind
that whispers
truths we hoped to ignore
seeking bliss in forgetting
remember/remember/remember
remember
re
member

legacy poem

and they will know
we were here
we the children of this salted land
our hearts beating with the cadence of
waves on shore

grains of sand
making new constellations
on the soles of our feet
birthing a universe on our skin

a poet's farewell
(for Sonya)

you made me understand that
what we do
is more than clever crafting of words
and extended vocabularies
this is about touch
this is about telling
this is a bout of worship
this is about a soul in a rainstorm
the drowning of weeds
the nourishing of seeds
this is about a remembered gesture
an unconditional smile
an uncompromising will

seedlings

2 coffins seed
my dreams
little ones
small with
innocence
lined with
brushed cotton
hibiscus petals
thorns off a kosha tree

you and i
there
me digging up the graves
of our ancestors
making familiar room for
new grief

ignoring artifacts *you offer no help*
uncovered *hands busy at your sides*
in this frantic
turning of dirt
i have no time to spare
share
for visitations
not with newer histories to bury

this poem

this poem
is a blessing
is a prayer
this poem is an exorcism
a cleansing of the soul
for new demons to inhabit

to the light and other
things of quiet beauty

(for Nick)

some are like water
deep still wide
patient with un/intentioned grace
just with being
expansive like the tides

you look to the light
and other things of quiet beauty
& time the passing of the clouds
on the hills
& pause as their shadows
sweep by in subtle rebellion
but you wait
sure of the return
of un/interrupted light

waterpoem 3

when storms spiraled overhead heaving
water over shipwrecked reefs and sand
banks and banking sand shifting cities
makeshift cities
a yard salted by rain wind flaying leaves
and kosha needles inhaling the smell of a
storm knocking on our horizon

waterpoem 4

the sea is heavy
with bodies
overcast souls
some walk
seeking solace
some walk with eyes open
with eternal surprise
deep 6-ing in the shallows of submerged
streets

there is a sadness
in the weightlessness of a body
afloat
displaced from the ground
defying gravity and other
manmade theories

maybe this is not the time for poems and
love songs
but sometimes
a mouth needs to sing
a throat needs to do more than wail
eyes need to tear
with the salt from within

waterpoem 5

there is a sea inside me
sprawling wide
surface warmth
unplumbed depths

the embrace of oceans
is the love i know
new currents chilled by
the melting of icecaps
soothe equatorial temperatures
and still with the call of a sure horizon
i crash into your eroding shores

there is a sea inside me
witness to countless crimes
i carry evidence in my belly
Witness a flotilla of bodies
beached bloated blurred pixelated
adrift in a history still seeking remem-
brance

motherlines or breast- feeding the diaspora

the presence of love is greater than the
absence of the body
i believe
the mothers i have known
in fragile memories
have known love
have known loss
have known me and now know you
this bond is a cycle
a circle not understood
by passersby

first there is Mom
mother of my mother's mother
who outlived one daughter's life
and another's sanity
she too comes from
mothers who have had to
cut their children loose
give them up to the care
of un-natural mothers
and though there was outer distance
there is always the inner line

so i named you blue
the deepest blue
my deepest blues
and like you
i knew my mother's mother first

Oma
i called her
my grand mother
tall imposing
wise eyes
that reached deep
and expected much
i learned lessons
i did not know i was being taught
that manners was not meekness
that there was strength in a smile
that there was healing in the tears
of women
and in the laughter of our men

she died when i was four
at her funeral they passed me
over her open grave
according to the old ways
it meant that i was the favored one

my first memories of my mother
were born
on that day

in my deepest blues
i wonder
will you know of the mothers
in our line that
gave their children
to other mothers?
women who know
about the presence of love
over the absence of the body

or will you be
the sullen girl
i was
hardly smiling
not unhappy
just blue
deep blue
like indygo

blue water
blue movement
blue tears
blue screams

dreams of tidal blue
washing over me
washing through me
leaving me only the echo of
your name
economy of letters
ripe
bursting with meaning
indigo child
a deeper shade of blue
a deeper shade of blues

now there is Mama
my mother, your mother's mother
who has had to give me
up twice
her only woman/child
the moody girl with old eyes
who prefers the memories of love
who knows about the presence of love
and the presence of spirit
the sullen one whose love
is unconditional,
unyielding
a relentless thing
whose cycle is a circle not understood

by passersby

and when we two remain
within the cycle that is
our circle that is
our line of mothers
i will let you go again
as it has always been
and you must let me go
as it must be
and i will teach you that
the presence of our love is stronger than
the absence of my body
it is our bond
that is a cycle
a circle not understood
by passersby

bitter water

strange tides
these days
fill up my cup
with bitter water

strange tides linger
set my home adrift
rekindle ancestral memories
me a refugee
make me a refugee

strange tides simmer
reluctant to recede
trapped between a tired sea
and a seething lake
swing low sweet chariot
swing low

strange tides linger
soaking festered sores
softening the scabs of dreams deferred
healing unknown hurts
all this salt needs a place to go
and my cup runneth over

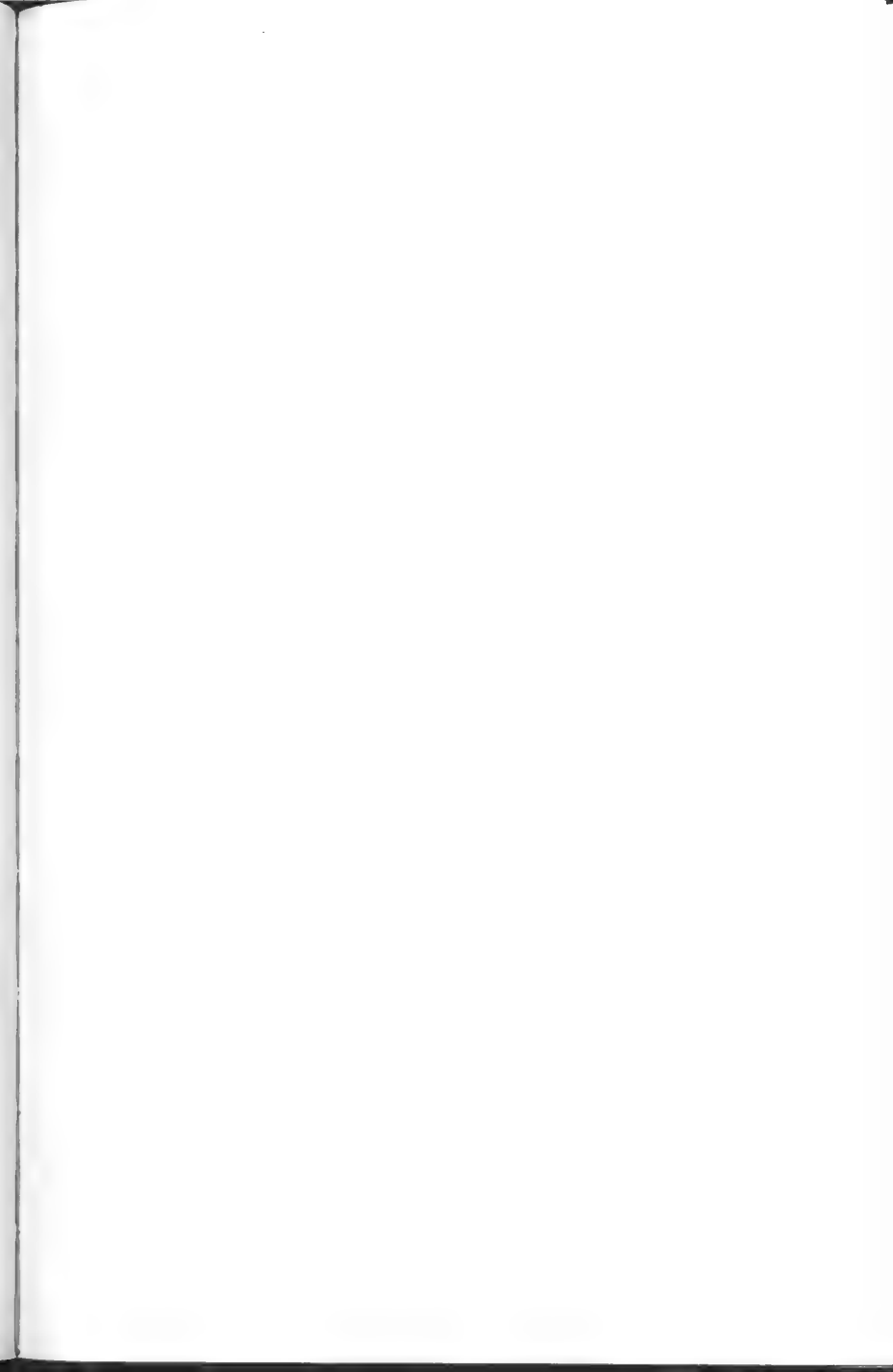
strange tides these days
still a lullaby
an ancestral hymn
wade in the water
wade in the water

strange tides reach underground
shifting tectonic plates
forming new topographies
with the bones of our young
suffer the children
suffer the children

strange tides these days
wash our dead away
as it was in the beginning
street cornered preachers
shout of sin and lasting days
Gods gunna trouble the water
God's gunna trouble the water

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Drisana Deborah Jack was born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 1970, to Caribbean parents. As a child her parents brought her to St. Martin, her mother's home island, where she was reared in Cole Bay village. Jack graduated from SUNY at Buffalo with an MFA in 2002 but by then had already co-founded and acted with the Teenage Acting Company while attending the MPC high school, and published her first poetry book, *The Rainy Season* (1997), in St. Martin. She went on to exhibit her artwork in the Caribbean, the USA, Europe, and Japan. Jack, a Caribbean artist by "geography and cultural/spiritual location, constructs ... a personal/cultural history based on ancestral or re-memory using painting, video, photography, sound art, and poetry." Her poetry has appeared in *The Caribbean Writer* and *Calabash*. Articles citing and reviewing her work have appeared in *Today*, *The St. Maarten Guardian*, *Beurs- en Nieuwsberichten*, *Artpapers Journal*, *Buffalo News*, and in Fabian Badejo's *Salted Tongues – Modern Literature in St. Martin* (2003). Jack has recited her poetry and lectured on the cultural arts at readings and festivals such as No To The Franco-Dutch Treaty, CARIFESTA VI, VII, at the Studio Museum of Harlem, the Miami Bookfair International, Crossing the Seas, Poetry Africa, and Tradewinds. A leading St. Martin poet and mother of one daughter, Jack is an assistant art professor at New Jersey City University. Awards and honors include a Caribbean Writers Institute Fellow (UM), Prince Bernhard Culture Fund and New York Foundation for the Arts grants, SUNY Buffalo Dissertation Fellowship, Photography Institute fellow, Lightwork Artist-in-Residence (Syracuse University), CEPA Exhibition Award, and a US National Endowment for the Arts residency at Big Orbit Gallery. *skin* is Jack's second book of poems.



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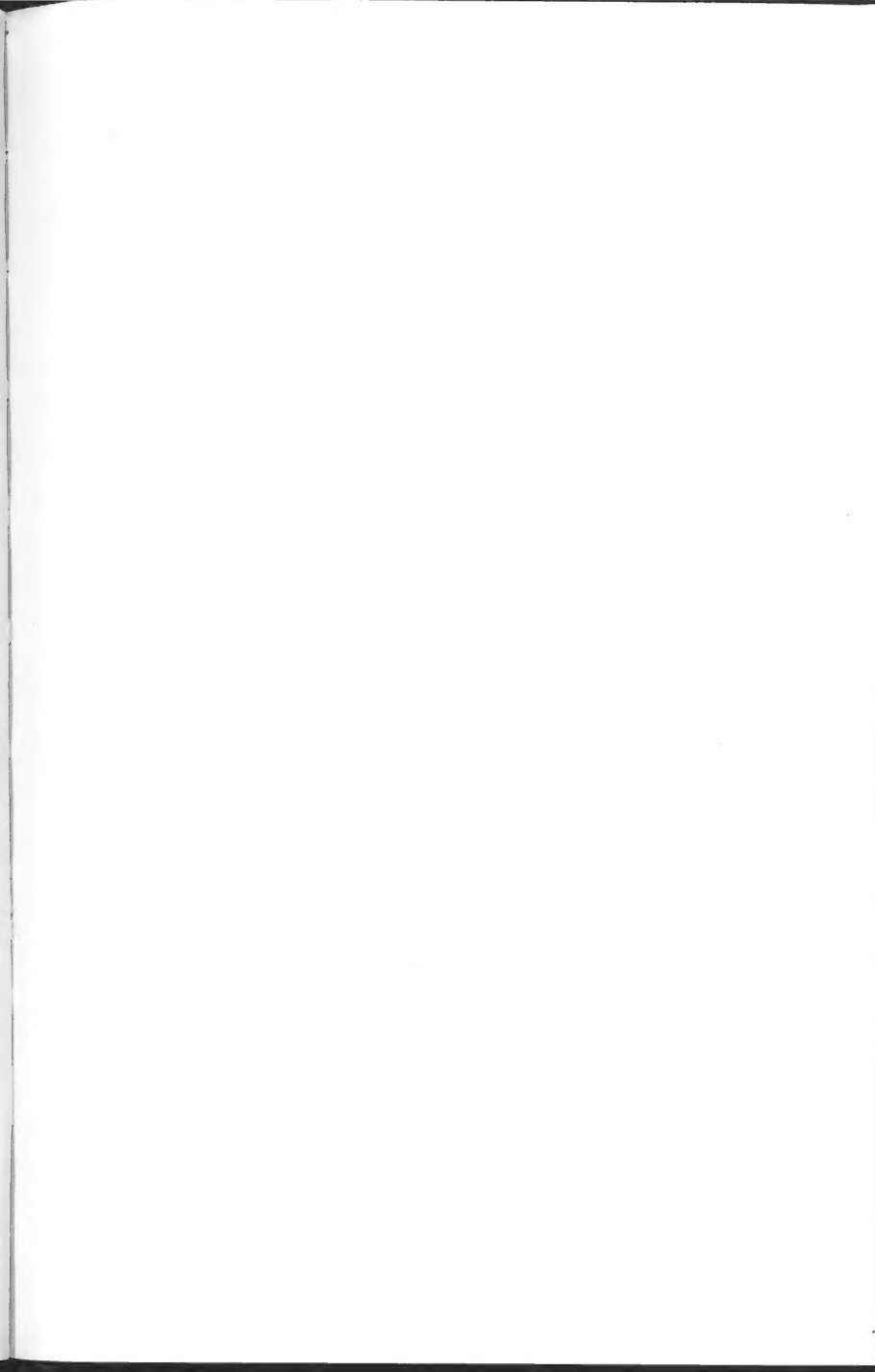
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— Jacqueline Goffe-McNish
State University of New York



Drisana Deborah Jack is a leading St. Martin poet/artist, "constructing a personal/cultural history based on ancestral or re-memory" Her poetry has appeared in *The Caribbean Writer* and *Calabash*. Jack has recited her poetry and lectured in the Caribbean, USA, and South Africa. The mother of one daughter is currently an assistant professor at New Jersey City University. Awards and honors include a Caribbean Writers Institute Fellow, Prince Bernard Culture Fund grant, and a US National Endowment for the Arts residency at Big Orbit Gallery. *Skin* is Jack's second book of poems.

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